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House Panel Approves $267 Billion Defense Bill

Republicans Cite Potential Russian Threat in Ordering Money for Submarines, Missiles

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House National Security Committee Republicans have pushed through a $267 billion defense budget package with billions of dollars in high-tech weapons that lawmakers mistrustful of the friendly new Russia said the United States needs in case the threatening old Russia re-emerges.

During the days-long debate that ended just before midnight Wednesday, Republicans on the panel cited the potential future threat from Russia as reason to build a series of ever-more powerful nuclear submarines, and sophisticated sea- and land-launched missiles that could shoot down missiles aimed at the United States.

Referring to a U.S.-Soviet dispute that began during the Reagan administration, they approved a provision demanding vigilance in dealing with Moscow because of an incident in which the United States caught the Soviet Union cheating on the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.

In 1983 the United States discovered construction of a special type of radar near the town of Krasnoyarsk that violated the ABM Treaty because it could be used as early warning detection against incoming U.S. ballistic missiles.

The "sense of Congress" resolution, included in the spending bill, states that in 1983 "the Soviet Union intentionally violated its legal obligations" under the treaty. "The United States should remain vigilant in ensuring compliance by Russia with its arms control obligations" and should "bear in mind" past violations when negotiating future arms control agreements, the resolution says.

Democrats protested that Republicans were living in the past, drawing swift retorts from the GOP.

"We caught the rascals lying," said Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham (R-Calif.).

"But the Soviet Union doesn't exist anymore," argued ranking minority member Rep. Ronald V. Dellums (D-Calif.), who said the bill would unnecessarily antagonize Russian officials engaged in arms control negotiations with Americans.

"The facts are the same now as then," retorted Rep. Curt Weldon (R-Pa.).

"This [resolution] is absolutely necessary," Rep. Robert K. Dornan (R-Calif.) stressed. "Half of these people are still there [in Russia]."

The committee's defense spending bill is set for House floor debate June 12. The Senate Armed Services Committee will pass its 1996 spending bill next month, which the Senate will then approve, change or reject. The Senate and the House versions will then be reconciled in a conference committee this summer.

While the Senate already has agreed that President Clinton's recommended $258 billion in defense spending is sufficient—but it must now decide how the money is to be spent—the House voted last week to add $9.5 billion to Clinton's request.

The National Security Committee got the first whack at deciding how it should be spent, and many Republican members said they believe defense spending is dangerously low.

"This bill marks a turning point in the national security debate of the last decade," Committee Chairman Floyd Spence (R-S.C.) said. "We have brought the defense budget out of free-fall. . . . This is not yet a hollow military, but it is a brittle one."

To remedy that, the Republicans added more than $6 billion in equipment and $3 billion for pay raises and improvements in military housing.

At the same time, the committee voted to reduce the secretary of defense's staff by 25 percent over the next four years, cut 30,000 people from the acquisition bureaucracy and turned over some non-defense functions, such as administering the civilian payroll, to private enterprise. They also cut $171 million from the administration's $371 million request for the so-called Nunn-Lugar program to help the former Soviet Union dismantle nuclear and chemical weapons.

The largest and most controversial changes in the weapons program includes taking $1.5 billion that was to be spent on a third Seawolf-class nuclear submarine and using it instead to make a bigger and more stealthy second Seawolf and an upgraded new attack submarine, the first of a new line of more advanced submarines.

They also voted to add $553 million to keep open the possibility of producing more than 20 B-2 long-range "stealth" bombers, $450 million to speed development of a system designed to guard against missile attacks against the United States, and another $450 million to improve short-range antimissile systems such as those used in the Persian Gulf War.

Other big-ticket items include nearly $1 billion to initiate building of up to 12 amphibious transport ships, $650 million for an Aegis destroyer and $600 million for four roll-on roll-off transport ships.

The committee added $111 million to buy more precision-guided munitions, such as laser-guided bombs and air-launched cruise missiles, and it approved more than $400 million for 12 more fighter jets.